

Government Leadership in Preventing Childhood Obesity

Reversing the rapid rise in obesity among American children and youth will require a broad-based approach involving multiple partners and tough choices and trade-offs at various levels. Given the overarching nature of the issue, prevention efforts need to be coordinated at the highest federal levels. In addition to federal contributions, state and local governments should take on a leadership role by raising childhood obesity prevention to a top priority and making sustained commitments to support policies and programs that match the scale of the problem.

Federal Commitment

Just as broad-based approaches have been used to address other public health concerns—including automobile safety and tobacco use—obesity prevention should be public health in action at its broadest and most inclusive level. **Prevention of obesity in children and youth should be a national public health priority.**

Since the 1930s, the federal government has had commitments to programs that address nutritional deficiencies and encourage physical fitness, but only recently has obesity been targeted specifically. In *Healthy People 2010*, the health objectives for the nation, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) set a goal of reducing the proportion of children and youth who are obese to 5 percent by 2010. Only through policies, legislation, programs, and research will meaningful changes be made. The Secretary of HHS is in the best position to convene a high-level task force involving other federal agencies to coordinate research programs, policies, and budgets aimed at reducing childhood obesity and to catalyze the interdepartmental collaborations needed to resolve such a complex issue.

Congressional support will be crucial to ensuring that funding is made available for the research that is needed to further elucidate the causes of childhood obesity and to identify the best measures to prevent it. For example, expansion of the total funding for the state grant programs available through the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention could lead to needed resources being

allocated to support more states, particularly those with the highest prevalence of childhood obesity. Congressional support also is key to moving forward efforts that need legislative authorization, such as setting nutritional standards for all foods and beverages available in schools.

KEY ACTIONS

Government at all levels should provide coordinated leadership for the prevention of obesity in children and youth. The President should request that the Secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services convene a high-level task force to ensure coordinated budgets, policies, and program requirements and to establish effective interdepartmental collaboration and priorities for action. An increased level and sustained commitment of federal and state funds and resources are needed.

The federal government should:

- Strengthen research and program efforts addressing obesity prevention, with a focus on experimental behavioral research and community-based intervention research and on the rigorous evaluation of the effectiveness, sustainability, and scaling up of prevention interventions.
- Support extensive program and research efforts to prevent childhood obesity in high-risk populations with health disparities, with a focus both on behavioral and environmental approaches.
- Support nutrition and physical activity grant programs, particularly in states with the highest prevalence of childhood obesity.
- Strengthen support for relevant surveillance and monitoring efforts, particularly the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES).

State and Local Initiatives and Support

State and local governments are in the best position to focus on the specific needs of their state, cities, and neighborhoods. Many of the issues involved in preventing childhood obesity—including actions on street and neighborhood design, plans for parks and community recreational facilities, and locations of new schools and retail food facilities—require decisions by county, city, or town officials. States should increase funding for their public health agencies so that they can more fully follow through on launching and evaluating obesity prevention efforts. Governments at all levels should coordinate national efforts with state and community efforts and engage community organizations and the private sector in developing new approaches to promoting healthy weight.

Evaluation of Efforts

Rigorous evaluation of obesity prevention interventions is essential. Only through careful evaluation can prevention interventions be refined; those that are unsuccessful can be discontinued or refocused, and those that are successful can be identified, replicated, and disseminated. The federal investment in research focused on childhood obesity must be strengthened.

KEY ACTIONS (CONTINUED)

- Undertake an independent assessment of federal nutrition assistance programs and agricultural policies to ensure that they promote healthful dietary intake and physical activity levels for all children and youth.
- Develop and evaluate pilot projects within the nutrition assistance programs that would promote healthful dietary intake and physical activity and scale up those found to be successful.

State and local governments should:

- Provide coordinated leadership and support for childhood obesity prevention efforts, particularly those focused on high-risk populations, by increasing resources and strengthening policies that promote opportunities for physical activity and healthful eating in communities, neighborhoods, and schools.
- Support public health agencies and community coalitions in their collaborative efforts to promote and evaluate obesity prevention interventions.